

## Light in her Face by FrazzledSquidz

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**Summary:**

"Nancy's gone."

"Gone where?" Jonathan mumbled, rubbing his eyes roughly. He'd worked late last night and then had stayed up with Will playing Atari and celebrating summer break with him. Judging by where the sun was, he hadn't slept more than five hours.

"She's *gone*." Steve stressed. "As in, not in Hawkins anymore."

# 1. Chapter 1

“Byers... Byers... *Jonathan!*”

Jonathan woke up a gasp, twisting around to find Steve sitting on the edge of his bed, face creased in concern. Behind him, Jonathan’s bedroom window was open, letting the warm air in. “I told you, man, you can just walk in the front door,” he muttered after a moment, biting back a yawn.

Steve frowned. “What? No, listen. Nancy’s gone.”

“Gone where?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes roughly. He’d worked late last night and then had stayed up with Will playing Atari and celebrating summer break with him. Judging by where the sun was, he hadn’t slept more than five hours.

“She’s *gone*.” He stressed. “As in, not in Hawkins anymore.”

Jonathan blinked, feeling his brain wake up extremely reluctantly. “What?”

“Yeah! I went to her house this morning and she wasn’t there, so I actually talked to the Wheelers and they were all, ‘Oh yeah she went on her college-tour road trip thing didn’t she tell you?’ I didn’t know about it! Did she tell you?”

“What? No...” He frowned at the covers bunched around his waist, trying to think if she had mentioned it, but he couldn’t think of a single instance. He met Steve’s eyes. “No, she didn’t say anything to me. So, wait, she just... packed up and left?”

Steve rose his eyebrows and nodded, looking worried. “Yeah. And her dad said that she went with some friends. That she took his car, went to go pick them up, and then hit the road. But...”

But Nancy didn’t have any friends outside of them, not since Barb.

“She’s *alone*?” Jonathan struggled internally. On the one hand, she was very competent and brave as hell and had faced down a literal monster. On the other hand, people could be worse than monsters at

times. And he was pretty sure she didn't take a gun or spiked bat along with her. "Do you know where she went?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah. Well, not exactly, but I know which direction she headed. And she's always talking about those big colleges on the East Coast. I bet you anything she went to Massachusetts."

Jonathan's mind reeled. Harvard? But it was a thousand miles away, literally. "Should we... should we go after her?"

He nodded again, decisively. "Yeah, definitely."

"But... She didn't tell us for a reason, right?"

"Byers!" Steve stood, throwing his arms in the air. "Our girlfriend-our extremely smart and motivated and beautiful girlfriend- has just packed up and left for another part of the country *without letting us know*. Put some shit in a bag. We're going."

Jonathan breathed out, nodding quickly. "Yeah. Okay... yeah. But I have to drop Will off at the Wheeler's. And leave a note for my mom."

Steve groaned theatrically. "Fine, you do that stuff, I'll pack for you. Go, go!"

Biting his lip, Jonathan swung out of bed and grabbed his shirt, pulling it on as he left his room to go wake Will. He had a feeling this was a bad idea.

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An hour later, much to Steve's disgruntlement, they were on the road. They had taken Jonathan's car because he was a better driver and had better music (it was a fact). They had stopped only to drop a puzzled Will off and to run to a gas station for some snacks and a map.

"Okay," Steve declared, haphazardly folding the map and dropping it to the floor of the car. "You're gonna be on 70-E forever, so there's nothing to worry about for awhile."

Jonathan found that statement to be patently untrue, but wisely chose not to say anything. "We're probably gonna have to stop at some point. Massachusetts is a long way away."

Steve waved his concerns off. "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it."

He sighed, trying not to think about how much money this trip was going to cost and how Steve would brazenly pay for it all and how inferior it was going to make him feel. "This may not be a good idea."

"It is."

Jonathan frowned, irritated by his carefree attitude. "Steve, she didn't tell us about this plan."

"Exactly! You don't find that suspicious?"

"She doesn't have to tell us everything," he pointed out. "We're her boyfriends, or w-whatever, not her parents. Maybe she needed a break and didn't know how to tell us."

Steve shook his head, eyes hidden behind his large sunglasses. "No, man, I'm telling you. This is weird, out of character. Why wouldn't she tell us?"

He shifted, thinking about Nancy's confession two months ago, about how she'd been driving Barb's folks to church. He thought there was probably a lot she never told them. As open as Nancy was, she also had an entire private world she didn't let them access. Jonathan didn't begrudge her of it, because he had something similar; his solitary moments that no one else was allowed to touch. Maybe Steve didn't have anything like that.

"She might not be happy to see us," Jonathan pointed out, unable to articulate his tumbling thoughts any clearer than that.

Steve sighed. "I don't care. I just... I just want to make sure she's okay. That she's safe, you know?"

Jonathan nodded, sighing again. It was too late now, anyway. They

were on the road, they had their plan (kind of), and Jonathan had gotten things figured out between Will and his mom. The only thing left to do was to try and find Nancy and just... hope for the best.

“Hey.”

He looked over to see Steve looking at him seriously, over the tops of his sunglasses. “What?”

“It’s going to be okay. We’re doing the right thing.”

Jonathan wasn’t sure, but he nodded anyway. Trying to quell his unease, he leaned over and turned up the stereo.

## 2. Chapter 2

Nancy stared up at the red brick building and breathed in deeply, unable to stop the grin from taking over her face. It was early summer and still vaguely chilly, but everything smelled so green and warm and alive here.

She couldn't believe she'd actually made it. She and Barb had made this plan probably close to two years ago, back when things were still hypothetical and they would marvel at their own daring to even *consider* applying for a place like Harvard University. They had joked about taking off the summer before their Senior year, staying in a little place by Lake Erie, hanging out with people at Harvard Square, and just imagining what it would be like to be in college.

Well, Nancy had done it, even down to finding a bed and breakfast right by the lake in some small town in Pennsylvania on her way. She'd booked a room in a hotel in Cambridge last night, had breakfast in the Square early this morning, and now she was wandering around campus, trying to picture herself as an actual student and not just a tourist.

*Could I do it?* she wondered, biting her lip. Could I actually make this dream come true?

Nancy had to try. She'd even been talking with the counselor at school to see what it would take to possibly graduate early. She just... she had to get out of Hawkins. Jonathan and Steve were lovely and wonderful distractions, but everything and everyone in that town just reminded her of Barb; from the road they used to take to school to stores they would frequent to the empty desk that always sat beside her, as if the other kids in her class were expecting Barb to come back any day. It was unbearable.

They had been inseparable since middle school, when they'd bonded over cute boys and color-coded flashcards. They had stayed best friends through failed tests, parental arguments, boy issues, and the rocky terrain of adolescence. It was impossible to erase six years of a friendship like that, especially from such a small place like Hawkins. During nights when she wasn't with Steve or Jonathan, Nancy would

curl up on her bed and stare at her baby blue phone. She and Barb used to speak almost every night when they weren't physically together. Now nobody called her and, even though she had never expected otherwise, it still made her feel terribly lonely sometimes.

*But could I come here without you?* Nancy wondered sadly, blinking back tears. In her mind, Barb rolled her eyes and told her to stop feeling sorry for herself.

Nancy slowly walked around the grounds, glancing at the other people. Some of them were obviously checking the place out, like her, while others looked like they were students taking summer classes. She was so desperate for this phase of her life to begin, to get out of Hawkins and all the memories it held. To put everything behind her and start clean, try to be someone else, someone better.

"Nancy!"

If she was honest with herself, she wasn't even surprised to see Steve and Jonathan making their way towards her, both boys looking a little worse for wear. And yet, she wasn't happy about it either.

"Nance," Steve panted, grinning as he caught up with her. "We found you!"

"Why are you here?" she frowned, crossing her arms. This had not been a part of her plan.

Behind Steve, Jonathan hugged his arms to his chest, the bags under his eyes more pronounced than ever, looking both weary and wary.

"Why are we...?" Steve blinked in confusion. "Nance, you... you left. One day you were just gone and we had no idea why or where or anything. We were worried!"

"You obviously had some idea as to where I went since you're *here*." She rose an eyebrow, feeling irritated. "I don't remember asking for an escort, or a babysitter."

Jonathan bit his lip, looking uncomfortable, but Steve was getting angry. "*Babysitter?* Nancy, what the hell? We just drove a thousand miles to come and be with you!"

“But I didn’t ask you to!” She threw her arms out. “If I had wanted company on this trip I would have told you about it! I would have invited you!” *I’m here to grieve*, she mourned inside her head, feeling overwhelmed. *Grieve a dream that will never manifest into reality.*

“Well why didn’t you?” Steve demanded. “Why would you think it’s a good idea to jump in a car and drive across the country all by yourself?”

“I can take of myself, Steve!”

“We know,” Jonathan interrupted quietly, stepping forward and grabbing one of Steve’s elbows. “Sorry, Nancy. We were just worried.”

Trying to hold back tears, Nancy shook her head. “I don’t need you two to worry about me.” She turned and quickly started to walk away, feeling suddenly childish. They didn’t call out after her, and she was both deeply grateful and yet disappointed at the same time.

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She woke a few hours later, blinking her sore eyes. Unable to think of another place to go, she had fled back to her hotel room and collapsed in bed. Apparently she had cried herself to sleep.

Sighing, Nancy sat up and went into the bathroom to wash her face. She felt exhausted, but also calmer. She regretted yelling at the boys, but, really, they shouldn’t have come. She was both touched and irritated at their concern, wishing they had trusted her to do her own thing without their supervision.

*They didn’t mean it like that*, she chided herself, pressing a cold, damp washcloth to her eyes. *You would have freaked out if one of them just disappeared, too.*

Still. She hadn’t told them for a reason. She had needed this time by herself to process and to grieve the loss of all the plans she and Barb had created together. To grieve *Barb*. It was so hard to think of her as truly gone when every single thing reminded Nancy of her and everything she would never get to do. The list was unimaginable, yet Nancy couldn’t help but add to it every day. Every time she



experienced something new, she couldn't help but note that Barb would never get to. It was so hard to bear, yet she couldn't stop her thoughts any sooner than she could stop her own heart.

*You're being maudlin*, sighed the voice of Barb in her head. *You know I always hated that.*

Nancy found herself smiling a little. Barb had always been the straightforward, honest one of their friendship. She'd hated theatrics and dramatics, hated when Nancy didn't tell her the whole truth or tried to downplay events. *Oh my god! Just be honest!* she would say, both exasperated and amused. *You're such a teenaged drama queen, Nance.*

"Yeah, I am," she muttered to herself, sighing. She needed to find Steve and Jonathan, if they were still in town. She needed to finally tell them what was going on with her. They deserved that much, at least.

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Nancy couldn't help but smile fondly as she came up to them.

They knew each other too well; they had known that she would come back just as she knew they would be just where she left them, waiting for her. Apparently their bodies had given up on them, though. Jonathan was slouched against the trunk of a tree, head bowed and snoring gently. Steve was stretched out on the ground near Jonathan's legs, his hair a wild mess and his mouth slightly open.

She sat in front of them quietly, wanting to just observe them for a minute. They really did look tired. They must have jumped in the car and drove straight through, just hoping that she would be here. It was so stupid, yet so sweet at the same time. *How could I love such idiots?* she mused, fighting a grin.

They were so different, in almost every way. Jonathan was folded in on himself, arms and legs crossed with his head bowed, hair covering his eyes. *(He really needs a haircut.)* Steve was stretched out without a care in the world, arms crossed behind his head and his t-shirt pulled up to flash a little bit of his stomach. It was actually kind of amazing that they got along, but maybe they just balanced each other out.

Quiet and contemplative meets rash and bold.

Reaching out, Nancy gently ran her hand along Jonathan's crossed leg, curling over his knee. He twitched and gasped, looking up with a sleepy frown. When he saw it was Nancy he uncrossed his arms and gently took her hand, looking into her eyes earnestly.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

She smiled, but shook her head slowly. "No... I'm really not. And I should've told you guys way before this." With her free hand, Nancy reached over and gently shook Steve's leg. He woke up just like Jonathan: with confusion, and then with obvious relief and joy when he saw she had come back to them. How had she landed such sweet guys?

"Hey..." Steve smiled hesitantly, running his hand through his hair as he sat up. "I'm really sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have yelled like that."

"It's okay." She reached out and took his hand, not sparing a single thought for who might see them and question their behavior. "I'm sorry, too. I mean, you really shouldn't have followed me out here, but I overreacted. And I really haven't been honest with you guys. I... I haven't been handling everything very well. Barb. I mean, her death." Nancy took a shaky breath, feeling unaccountably nervous. She looked between them, feeling anxious. "I really haven't been okay since all that happened. But I'd... I'd like to tell you about it, if you want to listen?"

"Of course," Steve said instantly, looking concerned. Jonathan nodded as well, squeezing her hand supportively.

Blinking back sudden tears, Nancy glanced up at the tree they were under and then around. *No. No more hiding*, she told herself. She let her tears fall, tickling their way down her cheeks and roll along her jaw. "I... I feel responsible. For what happened. I was the one that convinced her to come with me to the party- she never even wanted to go. And if she hadn't been trying to copy me with that beer trick, she wouldn't have cut her hand."

Her voice wavered dangerously. "If I had just listened and gone home with her, she wouldn't have been alone and vulnerable. And maybe if... if I had just paid attention sooner to my brother, maybe I could have found her before that monster killed her." Yanking her hands back, she covered her eyes and she started to sob, shaking her head. "Everything that happened that night- I- I- I should have listened to her from the beginning! I shouldn't have gone there and I shouldn't have pushed her away! N-now she's dead and she'll never get to kiss anyone or go to college or see her family again or- or have kids or-"

Nancy found herself surrounded by warmth as Jonathan and Steve flanked her and wrapped their arms around her, one set around her chest and another around her hips. She kept her face hidden as she cried, loudly and unabashedly, letting the two people she cared most about in the world see her ugly and vulnerable and childish.

*Good job, Barb whispered in the back of her mind. Look at you not repressing stuff. You're really growing up.*

Even though the thought made her sad, it also helped soothe her tortured heart and mind. She knew, logically, that Barb's death wasn't her fault. But it was how she felt and, no matter how much she tried to push it away, it always came back to haunt her in quiet moments. But maybe by admitting it, by trusting people with her feelings and letting them help her and reaffirm that she wasn't responsible, maybe it would get a little easier. Never *easy*, but maybe just... easier.

*You'll be just fine*, her imagined Barb mused quietly. *You always are, Nance.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

*Yeah, she's got life in her veins  
She don't need no rescue and she's okay  
She looks into the sky  
And all her tears are dry  
She kiss her fears goodbye  
She's gonna be alright.*

Rescue by Yuna

## Author's Note:

*If you're lonely lonely lonely wake me  
If you're lonely lonely lonely wake me  
If you're lonely lonely lonely wake me*

*I can't believe I captured your heart  
Right from the start I knew  
You'd set a fire in me*

*And I'd rather be sad with you  
Than anywhere away from you...*

Wake Me by Bleachers